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Note

CONINGTON ON *AEN.* iv. 257

Hic primum paribus nitens Cyllenius alis
Constitit; hinc toto praeceps se corpore ad undas
Misit, avi similis, quae circum litora, circum
Piscoscos scopulos humilis volat aequora iuxta.
Haud aliter terras inter caelumque volabat,
Litus arenosum Libyae ventosque secabat
Materno veniens ab avo Cyllenia proles.

The above is the reading of Conington (vss. 252–58). His interpretation of the difficult and disputed vs. 257 follows:

I believe the difficulty will vanish if we understand “*litus ventosque secabat*,” “he was dividing the shore from the winds,” i. e., he was flying close to the shore, so as to be, as it were, between the winds and the land—a repetition in more specific and defined language of “*terras inter caelumque volabat*.”

Thus Conington, but, as far as I know, succeeding editors have unanimously ignored or rejected his suggestion. Is it untenable?

The reading of many modern editions makes it so, for *ad* is inserted after *arenosum*, and the point omitted after *volabat*. This makes a verse scholastically reputable, since it has the authority of Ribbeck, Hirtzel, and many others; pedagogically attractive, since it is “too easy to miss” in translation; and especially gratifying to the destructive critic, since, as to poetic or narrative content, the words become as barren as the sandy shores of Libya, and, in simple justice to the poet, we are fain to deny their Vergilian origin. But the doctors disagree. Ribbeck has *ad Libyae*. So do Kappes and Hirtzel, and nearly all of the American school editions, except the carefully edited text of Greenough and Kittredge, which gives “*Litus arenosum Libyae*.” This is the reading of Conington; and most English editors, like Papillon and Haigh, Sidgwick, Kennedy, and Henry agree with Conington in reading, though not in interpretation. This, too, is the text of Thilo and Hagen in the Commentaries of Servius. Wagner (ed. Heyne,) declares *ac Libyae* to be the “true reading.”

The manuscript readings start with confusion. The two earliest, in the Palatine and the Medicean, are obvious blunders—*aoac Libyae* in P, and, probably, *at Libyae* in M. These have been corrected by later hands to

ad Libyaë in P. and *ac Libyaë* in M. Succeeding manuscripts, for the most part, are divided between these two corrected readings, with the numerical preponderance in favor of *ac Libyaë*. The reading favored by Conington, namely, the omission of the short word before *Libyaë*, is neither early nor frequent, although the fact that Servius makes no mention of it lends color to the theory that *ac*, or *ad*, is a gloss. *Ac Libyaë*, which really serves his interpretation better, has much evidence in its favor. The most that can really be established by the manuscripts, however, is a very early and general uncertainty as to the wording and interpretation of the passage—a strange mistiness to start from *ad Libyaë*, a text as bald and easy as a schoolboy's exercise, but quite natural if we have either of the more difficult readings.

If, then, Ribbeck and his followers to the contrary, we may adopt either *arenosum Libyaë* or *ac Libyaë* as a working hypothesis, is anything to be made out of Conington's interpretation? An argument in its favor which Conington himself does not urge, and which has apparently escaped the notice of subsequent commentators, is this: It is a description of an actual fact of nature, as Vergil himself must have seen it on the Campanian coast, and as anyone may see it today. Watch the gulls as they fly along a stretch of sandy beach, and you cannot fail to see how they follow the shore line. They are looking for the food which the receding waves leave within their reach, and I do not know of a better Latin verb than *secant* to express their tracing of a dividing-line between the shore and, not the sea, since they are above the water, but the winds that play unchecked over its surface.¹

And in this connection the Homeric prototype will bear closer examination. I quote Palmer's translation of *Od.* v. 50-56.

He (Hermes) crossed Pieria, then from the upper air dropped down upon the deep and skimmed along the water like a bird, a gull, which down the fearful hollows of the barren sea, snatching at fish, dips its thick plumage in the spray. In such wise, through the multitude of the waves, moved Hermes. But when he neared the distant island, then turning landward, . . .

At first sight, the Homeric passage would seem to furnish an argument against the interpretation which we are considering, since there is no hint of it here. But a little comparison shows a clearly marked divergence from the original in Vergil, a divergence which begins in the unquestioned part of the simile. Vergil undoubtedly has in mind this passage of Homer, but, with equal certainty, he is not thinking of the same kind of bird. Homer's *λάρος* is not a gull, but a bird of the albatross type, a shearwater or a petrel,

¹ This must be observed at a distance from the tracks of the great liners, and from harbors. In such places, the gull has changed his habits to fit the conditions of the modern floating *cuisine*, and he follows, not the shore line, but the cook's galley.

which fishes over the "fearful hollows of the barren sea," and crosses the open. Vergil's *avis* is a gull or tern, which flies "about the fish-haunted rocks." Is it not natural to follow his course in the succeeding verse, as Homer follows his open-sea bird over the billows, as Vergil's eye must many a time have followed the gulls on the Italian coast, while they traced the shore line in the air?

As far as this interpretation affects the question of authenticity, it certainly adds to the probability of Vergilian authorship. The external objections to the passage are not very weighty. The crucial internal difficulty is not the assonance, of which there are other instances in our poet; and not the awkwardness or obscurity, which might be explained as due to lack of revision. It is the emptiness of the ordinary interpretation—they are *versus jejuni*, as they have been called. But with Conington's interpretation we have a real poet's view of a fact of nature, and we add two other distinct Vergilian characteristics to the passage—the explanation of 256 by repetition and expansion in 257, and the dwelling upon the details of the simile.

However, the awkwardness and obscurity of the passage are beyond question. Perhaps we have here a glimpse into the poet's laboratory—an idea of real poetic force, but in the rough, and doomed forever to await the finishing touches of the master's hand.

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